

THE TAIL THAT CREPT IN THE DOOR

by T. Morris Fraser

Brandy had a tail that any dog could be proud of, a long golden tail hung with soft, silken feathers, a tail that could be boisterous with excitement, or gently sway with devotion as she looked at you expectantly, a tail that would go thump on the floor when you entered the room, or hang down in dejection when you said “No”.

Brandy, in fact, was a big beautiful golden retriever, a champion from champion stock, and beautiful beyond any normal canine standards. In spite of that, however, she was a very respectful dog who would walk gently beside you on the street, stopping only to receive the homage she felt was due from every passing kid, and sitting quietly if you should stop and talk.

She didn’t go on the street very often, however, since she lived with us in the country, lording it over the other dogs in our boarding kennels. She would walk around the outside of the kennels looking at her unfortunate peers in regal disdain, “flaunting her tail”, as my daughter once said, with the innocence of a 12-year old. When she lay down, the tail would stretch languidly out behind her, ready to thump when the occasion demanded. And

when she settled down for sleep at night she would curl herself into a golden ball with her tail draped across her nose and its feathers nearly covering her eyes.

Now, I have to confess that, like some other beautiful females, she didn't always stick around home. Sometimes, on the demands of an importuning rabbit or raccoon, she would take off like an avenging angel, and no amount of calling would overcome the wild instinct that wasn't so very far beneath the surface. But, in reality, she rarely roamed much in the 25 acres that constituted her home. She didn't need to, for as far as she was concerned everything was close to hand. In fact she rarely left the immediate vicinity of the house except on the occasional demand of some canine necessity. And this must have been one of these occasions. Maybe the rabbit got too close, or maybe there was something that was much too interesting, but this time she left the vicinity and nobody knew she had gone.

In fact, the first intimation we had of any problem was when a Boy Scout came to the door. I remember looking through the glass panel and seeing a small group of Scouts clustered 500 feet away at the end of our driveway. The road wasn't much travelled, not even by a school bus. In fact, normally when we saw a car come by we either knew who it belonged to or thought it was somebody coming to collect or deposit a dog at the

kennels. The Boy Scout was a little hesitant, in spite of being out of breath from having run all the way up the driveway.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said touching his cap respectfully. “Ah, do you own a golden retriever dog?”

“Yes, I do,” I said, doubtfully, wondering what terrible thing the normally gentle and playful Brandy had been up to.

“I’m afraid there’s been an accident, sir, “ he went on, turning round and pointing down to the end of the driveway.

“What do you mean, an accident?” I said, beginning to get anxious. “Do you mean, one of the boys?”

“No sir, I mean the dog. She’s been hit by a truck. She was playing with us and along came this pickup, racing along far too fast. We dived into the ditch, but the dog was hit. She’s in the ditch now, but she can’t move. She’s alive, though,” he added hopefully, “but the pickup went right on. I think he was drunk, he said, with disgust.

I ran. I ran to the foot of the driveway with the boy beside me, and there she was, in the ditch with her back legs at a crooked angle, and her beautiful tail twisted beside them. She looked at me with woebegone eyes, and her tail made a pitiful and unsuccessful attempt to wag.

The Scouts were wonderful. They helped me get her into the back of the station wagon and I rushed her to the vet.

“I’m afraid she’s badly hurt,” he said, as if I didn’t know. “But so far as I can see there’s no internal injury. Just her legs and her tail. But the blood supply to her tail is gone. I’m afraid I’ll have to amputate it before I can put her in a cast. I don’t think she’ll survive if I don’t.”

I thought of that beautiful tail, but I realized that there was no alternative. Either the tail or the dog had to go. The ultimate decision was easy.

It was six weeks before she came home again, delighted to see the familiar surroundings, delighted to walk around the kennels and patronize the other dogs. She was still the same happy dog, beautiful except where her tail used to be, and then - strange. Like a car with no trunk and a flat rear end, no beautiful tail with long hanging strands that reflected her every emotion. But she knew there was something wrong, although it seemed she didn’t quite know what. Occasionally she would turn round and inspect where the tail had been, as though she couldn’t understand why it didn’t do what it was supposed to do.

That night we went to bed with sad hearts as we realized in finality what had happened to our beautiful dog. As we left the room Brandy lay

down in her usual spot where she used to lie curled in a ball with her tail round her nose and her eyes peeping through the fronds. She lay down for a moment, curled as she used to be, but obviously felt that something was wrong. She got up, turned round and round a few times and lay down again. But it didn't satisfy her. She stood up and tried again, and as we climbed the stairs and got ready for bed we heard her scrabbling around the floor vainly seeking some satisfaction. I don't know if she slept that night. We slept fitfully. It was the same for several nights.

And then came the miracle. A miracle in the shape of a fluffy white kitten which appeared out of nowhere. Now, Brandy had nothing against cats. And for that matter cats didn't seem to be particularly afraid of her. She would chase a cat sporadically every now and then if she saw one outside, which wasn't often, but it was more in the nature of a mutual game than a hunt to the death. And if a cat happened to come into the room where she lay she would wag that long beautiful tail and they would gently nuzzle each other.

Anyway, in came the kitten, or Cat as we came to call her. In the course of the morning and afternoon she adopted the house as though it were her own. And while cats were not really our thing we didn't raise any objections. We were so far from any other household it was clear that it was

a stray. So we fed it, we let it sit on our respective laps, and Brandy accepted it as just another member of the family.

That night when we went to bed we expected another unhappy night for Brandy, and perhaps another disturbed night for ourselves, But as we went upstairs it was strangely quiet from below, and as we got ready for bed, there were no sounds of scrabbling on the floor.

“Maybe she’s sick,” said my wife. “Maybe something’s gone wrong. I’ll go down and find out.”

She crept quietly down the stairs. A few moments later I heard her faint call to me and I followed her down.

“Look!” she said, and pointed.

I looked. There on the floor, on her usual spot, lay Brandy, curled up in a languid ball, peacefully asleep. Curled around Brandy’s nose, with the fronds of her hair soft against Brandy’s eyelids, lay Cat, gently licking her paws in watchful tranquillity. Brandy had gotten her tail back.